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Social Media and Cultural Heritage

Module 4 — Content Creation & Digital Storytelling

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In this module we turn from strategy to content creation. The central argument is that narrative is not decorative. Narrative is the structure through which information becomes meaningful.

Why Storytelling Matters

Human beings remember stories more easily than isolated data. We understand events through sequence, causality, uncertainty, and resolution. Archaeology is particularly suited to this logic because archaeological work is itself a process of investigation.

Excavation begins with questions, proceeds through observation, encounters evidence, develops hypotheses, and revises interpretations. Good storytelling does not replace scientific accuracy. It gives accuracy a form that audiences can follow, remember, and care about.

The Archaeological Narrative Arc

An archaeological narrative can often be organized around a clear arc. The exposition introduces the site, period, research questions, and team. The rising action follows fieldwork: excavation, survey, documentation, sampling, cleaning, recording, and discussion.

The climax may be a significant discovery, an unexpected context, or a new interpretive problem. The denouement explains how the team responds through documentation, conservation, and preliminary analysis.

Importantly, the resolution does not always provide a definitive answer. In archaeology, resolution often means explaining what the evidence contributes and what questions remain open. This makes the public aware of both discovery and method.

From Data to Narrative

A frequent challenge in heritage communication is transforming technical information into accessible narrative without losing accuracy. A technical description may record a find, its trench, locus, dimensions, and preliminary date. This information is necessary, but for most audiences it does not yet create meaning.

A narrative version situates the same evidence in time, place, and question. It may describe the moment of recovery, the material qualities of the object, and the uncertainty that remains.

The facts are not invented. They are organized. Narrative transformation should clarify rather than distort. We are not making archaeology fictional. We are making the process of archaeological meaning visible.

Four Main Content Types

For practical planning, heritage content can be grouped into four main types. The first is process documentation, which explains how archaeological work is done: excavation, survey, finds processing, sampling, drawing, photography, and conservation.

The second is discovery narrative, which focuses on significant finds or contexts. The third is human-interest content, which foregrounds the people behind research: team members, local collaborators, students, specialists, and communities.

The fourth is contextual and interpretive content, which explains broader historical and cultural significance. A strong communication strategy balances all four. This balance creates rhythm, variety, and depth.

Responsible Discovery Narratives

Discovery narratives are often the highest-engagement content type in archaeology. They activate curiosity, suspense, and wonder. They are also the highest-risk content type, because the moment of discovery is often the moment when interpretation is least secure.

Responsible communication must separate evidence from interpretation. It should explain what has been found, what is known, what is still uncertain, and what further analysis may clarify.

Avoid unsupported superlatives such as "unique," "priceless," or "the first ever." Avoid language that implies monetary value. A discovery post should be the beginning of an interpretive thread, not the final word.

Human Interest and Representation

Human-interest content is powerful because audiences connect with people as much as with objects. Fieldwork stories, team profiles, local collaborations, and specialist interviews can make archaeology feel more immediate and human.

However, this content requires ethical care. People should not be used as visual decoration for institutional storytelling. Informed consent is essential, especially when photographing local workers, students, community members, or vulnerable groups.

Representation should avoid portraying fieldwork settings as exotic and should not present external researchers as heroic discoverers while local expertise remains invisible. The human dimension of archaeology is a communicative strength only when represented responsibly.

Photography Standards

Photography is central to heritage communication because digital audiences often encounter archaeology first through images. Good field photography does not necessarily require expensive equipment, but it does require attention to light, framing, stability, scale, and context.

Natural light is usually preferable, especially early or late in the day. Composition helps the viewer understand what they are seeing. Technical photographs may require scales, while narrative photographs may prioritize atmosphere and human engagement.

Consistent color treatment and framing also contribute to institutional identity. Yet visual quality is not the only issue. Sensitive materials, sacred objects, human remains, and restricted contexts require clear protocols before photography or publication.

Short-Form Video Production

Short-form video has become one of the dominant formats of digital communication. TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts reward vertical framing, strong openings, clear structure, and rapid pacing.

The first few seconds are crucial. A video should begin with the most visually or conceptually compelling element, not with a slow introduction. Even a thirty-second video benefits from planning: a short script, a shot list, and one clear educational objective.

Subtitles are essential because many users watch without sound, and accessibility is a professional responsibility. Audio quality also matters. Wind noise, unstable footage, and unclear structure can weaken otherwise valuable content.

Open-Source and Low-Cost Tools

Professional heritage communication does not always require expensive software. Open-source and free tools can support high-quality production when used within a clear workflow.

Darktable and RawTherapee support RAW photo processing. GIMP and Photopea help with image editing. Inkscape is useful for vector graphics and infographics. Audacity supports audio cleaning. Kdenlive, DaVinci Resolve, and CapCut can be used for video editing at different levels of complexity.

For 3D documentation and visualisation, tools such as Meshroom, CloudCompare, and Blender can support photogrammetry, point-cloud processing, and reconstruction. The important issue is not the tool alone, but whether the team can use it consistently and sustainably.

Module 4 Key Takeaways

The essential lesson of this module is that content creation requires both narrative craft and professional standards. Archaeological communication becomes stronger when data are organized into meaningful stories, discoveries are framed responsibly, and people are represented ethically.

Storytelling is not the opposite of scientific communication. When used carefully, it is the means by which scientific information becomes publicly intelligible.

We have also seen the importance of workflow: ideation, capture, editing, copywriting, review, approval, publication, and monitoring. The next module develops this operational dimension by focusing on editorial planning and workflow management.